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PENNSYLVANIA

REPORT OF SELECT COMMITTEE OF HOUSE  
RELATIVE TO USE OF MERCURY IN PRACTICE  
OF MEDICINE



*Testimony before the Committee on the Army, Philadelphia, Dec. 1844*

REPORT  
OF THE  
SELECT COMMITTEE OF THE HOUSE,  
RELATIVE TO  
THE USE OF MERCURY  
IN THE  
PRACTICE OF MEDICINE.

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Printed by order of the House of Representatives, March 19, 1845.

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HARRISBURG:  
J. M. G. LESCURE, PRINTER TO THE STATE.  
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## REPORT.

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Mr. SAMUELS, from the select committee to whom was referred the petition of citizens of Westmoreland county, praying for the passage of a law prohibiting the use of mercury in the practice of medicine, begs leave to report :

That they have given the matter referred to them all the attention and patient investigation which its importance demands, so far as the time allotted them would permit. In communicating the result of their researches, they will endeavor to avoid all technicalities, where practicable, and make truth and brevity their guide.

To arrive at just conclusions in a matter of so much importance as the one at issue, various considerations have to be borne in mind—conflicting opinions and biased statements examined, and theories, often fortified in error, analyzed, in order to sift the wheat from the chaff. To effect these objects in as concise and comprehensive a manner as possible, will be the object aimed at by the committee. How far they will be able to succeed will be for others to judge.

In pursuit of this object it will be necessary first to inquire into the merits and demerits of the agent in question—whether or no its well known therapeutic properties are overbalanced or *neutralized* by its acknowledged deleterious effects on the system, under peculiar circumstances; and if the investigation should lead to the conclusion that its sanative properties predominate, or, in other words, that the class of mercurial remedies constitute a valuable order in the *materia medica*, then it may become necessary to enquire into the source of the popular prejudice which is known to exist against their use. In the pursuit of this inquiry it is proper to premise that the use of this potent agent is supposed to be confided, in all cases, to scientific and skilful hands. To charge home on the agent the faults and want of skill in the power that wields it, would be the acme of folly.

The question before the committee is, “whether or no the use of mercury, as a therapeutic agent, ought to be totally prohibited.” A brief description of this singular metal, and a few of its combinations, before we proceed to the discussion of its merits, may not be inapt.

Mercury, in its metallic state, is subject to all the general laws that govern other metals. When deprived of its latent caloric, by subjecting it to a temperature of forty-seven degrees below zero, it becomes solid, is malleable, and may be beat out with a hammer. It is also to some extent ductile, and differs but little in appearance or properties from lead. At the ordinary temperature of the atmosphere it melts, and from its great specific gravity, becomes extremely fluid, so much so that, under certain circumstances, it will penetrate freely and rapidly through the pores of wood; and in this state it is met with in the shops of the druggists. However, as it possesses no medicinal properties in the metallic state, it would be foreign to our present purpose to dwell longer under this head.

It is only in its various combinations that mercury is employed as a remedial agent. The number of compounds of which it is susceptible, is only equalled by the diversity of effect produced on the animal economy, by their internal or external application. The limits prescribed us will permit us merely to glance at this most important part of our subject.



The most usual form in which mercury is administered, as an internal remedy, is that of the hydrargyri-submurias, or *calomel*. In this form it is employed for various purposes, but most frequently as a mild and efficient cathartic.

Its peculiar action on the liver, renders its employment in hepatic and bilious affections almost indispensable, while its de-obstruent and discussive properties point it out as a powerful remedy in schyrrus and other chronic affections of the glandular system. In combination with *scilla maritima* and other hydragogues, it is an important agent in the cure of ascitas and hydrothorax. Combined with diaphoretics it increases their effect in an eminent degree; while in combination with other anthelmintics, or even given alone, it is proved, by experience, to be one of the most efficient agents for the expulsion of *tinea capitis* and other intestinal worms, in the whole range of the *materia medica*. In the cure of certain dangerous, and but too prevalent diseases, particularly among the dissipated classes, its efficacy is too well known to require further notice at the hands of your committee.

In cynanche trachealis the sanative effects of full doses of calomel are alone sufficient to rescue that invaluable agent from the sweeping anathema prayed for by the petitioners. In this most fearful of infantile diseases, the free use of calomel may justly be termed the sheet-anchor of hope. Its sedative and anti-phlogistic properties, when exhibited in doses sufficient to produce nausea and emesis, render it an instrument, in the hands of the skilful practitioner, to rescue thousands of innocents from an untimely grave.

The different combinations in which mercury is employed as an external application in the cure of psora, tetter, and other cutaneous affections, are too numerous and too well known, however interesting and important, to require particular notice at this time. Neither do the committee deem it necessary, even to *name*, all the different mercurial preparations occasionally used as internal remedies. There is, however, one other combination which may require some notice at our hands.

The hydrargyri oximurias, or bi-chloride of mercury, familiarly known by the name of corrosive sublimate, is perhaps, the most active form in which this potent agent is employed internally. An over-dose of this deadly poison, taken accidentally into the stomach, say four or five grains, proves almost necessarily fatal—and here it may not be amiss to state, though a little out of place, that the white or albuminous portion of eggs, taken in profuse quantities, is its best antidote.

The corrosive sublimate, when skilfully administered, is nevertheless a safe and efficient remedy. In certain peculiar diseases before alluded to, its use is almost indispensable—and here, in connection, we cannot refrain from adverting to the fact, that this potent and dangerous article constitutes an ingredient in a large class of quack nostrums that are daily hawked about the country and sold, as a cure-all, to unthinking individuals, who are silly enough to buy them. It composes the active ingredient in the celebrated panacea of that prince of quacks, *Doctor Swain*, of which thousands of bottles are sold annually, under the assurance of its containing nothing but *vegetable extracts*! The health—even the lives of thousands of individuals have doubtless been sacrificed at the shrine of this modern Juggernaut, and it is not impossible, but that some of the petitioners themselves may have laid aside the cup from which they had just quaffed the deadly poison, to take up the pen and sign the memorial before us!

That the panacea contains corrosive sublimate can no longer be denied; as the unerring test of chemistry has repeatedly succeeded in extracting it from the nostrum, procured fresh from the laboratory of the proprietor, and producing it in the metallic state. And the fact of this man's going before a magistrate, and, under the sanction of an oath, denying the existence of mercury in any shape, in the nostrum in question, only affords a melancholy instance of the depravity of man!

Your committee have thus briefly glanced at both the sanative and deleterious properties of the article in question. That an agent so powerful, exercising almost unlimited control over the organic functions, should, when improperly applied, be productive of corresponding evil, will be readily conceded—and that a large amount of mischief *has* been done, will not be denied. But that the occasional abuse of a valuable agent has ever yet been deemed sufficient grounds for the prohibition of its *use*, your committee

have yet to learn. As well might the surgeon be forbidden the use of a keen bistoury or lancet, for fear of cutting too deep—or the barber the employment of a keen razor, to prevent him from cutting the throat of his employer!

In short, it may be laid down as a position that defies refutation, that an agent that can do no harm *can do no good!* If the principle of excluding from the *materia medica* all articles that *may* do harm were adopted, the result would be that the practitioner would be confined to a very meagre class of means, and those of a useless and inert character. His hands would be tied, and while, with anxious solicitude he watched over the effects of his bread pills and his gum water, he would be compelled to stand by, with folded arms, while contagion, gangrene and death stalked fearfully over the land, deprived of the power of even attempting to save.

Far better would it be, to strike from the list of the learned professions the title of M. D., and at one fell swoop banish from among mankind the use of all remedial agents—proclaim at once, over the length and breadth of the land, that we, in the superlative acumen of legislative wisdom, in the nineteenth century, had made the startling discovery that the result of all the investigations and experience of ages, from the days of Galen and Æsculapius, down to the present eventful epoch, amount to nothing but dross, to be ground into ashes and scattered to the winds.

It is natural that prejudices should subsist among mankind. The greatest blessings that have yet been conferred on a suffering world have been received with reluctance, or rejected with scorn, by the biased or skeptic portions of the community—even the invaluable revelation of the inspired Jenner, which has nearly swept from the catalogue of diseases that awful scourge of the human race, the *small pox*, was not exempt from the common lot. And at the present enlightened day, when the experience of half a century has fully established its benign influence, vaccination still has its opponents. And thus it will continue to be, with regard to all great discoveries, as long as the human mind is constituted as it now is.

But why the mercurials should be selected as the target at which the envenomed shafts of the interested or misguided are to be pointed, your committee are at a loss to conceive. It is well known that the *materia medica* embraces a large class of remedies, both mineral and vegetable, possessing far greater activity on the system than the one in question. Are the memorialists unaware of the direful effects of arsenic, when improperly administered, either in large or small doses—or are they ignorant of its extensive and daily use as a medicament? Are they aware of the properties of the muriate of gold, the nitrate of silver, the sulphate of copper, or the prussiate of potash? Or, entering the domains of the “vegetable kingdom,” among the mazes of which certain seats of modern innovators delight to revel—are they unacquainted with the properties of the belladonna, the hyacinthus, the strichnus nux vomica, the stramonium, the colocynth, the elaterium, and a host of other members of the vegetable tribe, the one-half of a grain of the extract of which may prove a dangerous or even fatal dose? Is the prussic acid, extracted from the kernel of the peach stone, one drop of which applied to the tongue or eye produces instant death, unknown to them? Have they not heard of the oil of croton, one drop of which is a dangerous dose? Or of the sulphate and acetate of morphia, of which the dose is *one-eighth* of a grain? And are they not aware that all the above enumerated articles, and many others of equal activity, are in daily use, and frequently attended with the most beneficial results? If not, we would respectfully suggest to them the propriety of devoting a portion of their attention to the subject, in preference to embarking on a crusade against one of the safest and most efficient remedies on the list of the *materia medica*.

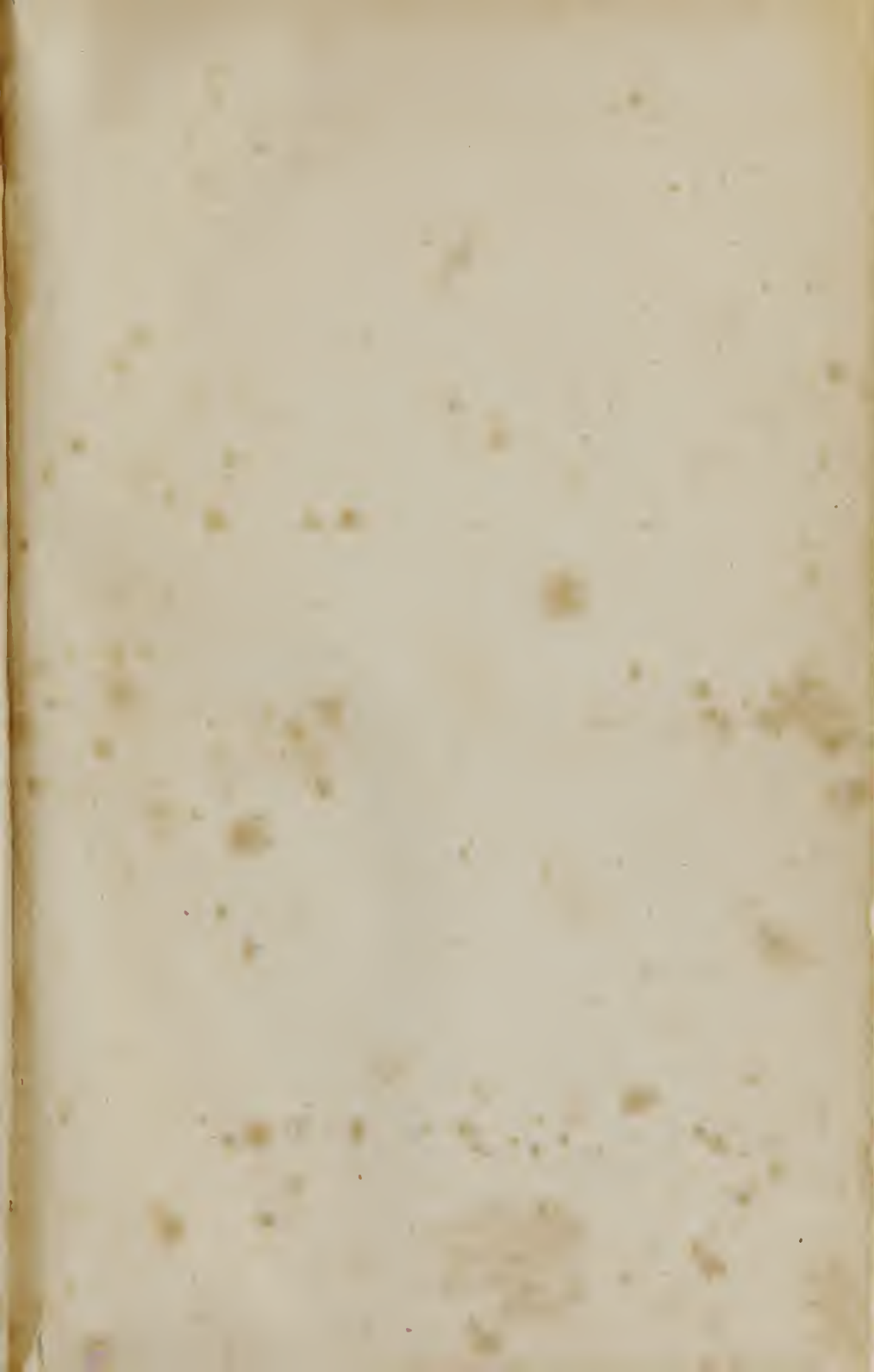
For the above, and various other reasons, the committee deem it inexpedient that the prayer of the petitioners should be granted.

They, therefore, offer the following resolution, viz :

*Resolved*, That the committee be discharged from the further consideration of the subject.







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